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FORESTRY SCIENCE SUMMARY
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NO. 4

BRINGING NATURE TO CITY CHILDREN

"Recreation is all things to all people," says Dr. LaVerne Dickerson, Forest Service researcher. A person, given leisure time and direction will do what makes him happiest. LaVerne Dickerson, given a group of people with a particular need, will do what makes her happiest - teach them to accept and adapt and grow.

Educating a child, or an adult, to accept an environment different from the one in which he was born and raised is harder to do than it might seem, according to Mrs. Dickerson. Her newest project, a cooperative venture for the U. S. Forest Service and George Washington University, involves just that challenge. This recreationist-social psychologist-educator is coming up with several novel, exciting approaches to the problem.

Additional information may be obtained from:
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NORTHEASTERN FOREST EXPERIMENT STATION UPPER DARBY, PENNSYLVANIA 19082

At a planning session, from left, are Betty Pugh, research assistant; Dr. James Breen; Mrs. Dickerson; and Forest Service researchers Robert Brush and Brian Payne.

"If kids are afraid of unfamiliar areas, it is because they are afraid of looking foolish," says Mrs. Dickerson. A child raised in the city who has never seen a dense, naturally growing forest may be afraid of his first encounter with the woods. Aside from an elemental fear of goblins and ghosts, his main concern will be, simply, what do I do? He may run through traffic patterns like a pro, but put him alone for the first time in a forest, and he feels surrounded by unfamiliar, bewildering forces.

Mrs. Dickerson terms this a "negative reaction to a negatively perceived experience" and suggests that the way to overcome it is to gradually build up the idea of success.

"We start with an environment that is natural to the people we are working with," she says. Thus the reason for a rather unique plot of land soon to be developed on the busy urban campus of George Washington University in Washington, D.C.

On what is now a simple grassy 50 by 100-foot plot edged with a few small bushes and trees, using the skills of university recreationists, Forest Service landscape architects, foresters and naturalists, and some basic equipment for undetected observation, Mrs. Dickerson hopes to establish a highly controllable, but true-to-life outdoor recreation laboratory for children.

Her vision includes trees, plants, shrubs, flowers, rocks, miniature hills and valleys and even a small pond or stream - a microcosm of the natural world. The main intrusion on this idyllic scene - the noise and

Noise from University traffic is an integral part of the experiment.

bustle of the surrounding city - becomes in this experiment a subjective ingredient and an asset. Mrs. Dickerson believes that the sounds of urban life will give the children adequate points of reference, even if they feel strange at first in their urban forest.

A quick visit to the potential laboratory in the summer of 1974 revealed a stark, rather forlorn-looking stretch of ground, encased as it was by three University buildings. One was a monolithic wall, reaching straight up without a break for what looked like a city block. Mrs. Dickerson admitted the problems involved, or what she would rather call the "challenges." Aside from the physical and conceptual difficulties of building the laboratory, Mrs. Dickerson must develop an acceptable program of observation. She must know what she is looking for in the children, and why she is looking for it, without letting preconceptions color her observations. The monitoring system itself should be both effective and unobstrusive. A preliminary list of activities to be observed includes motor, play and the processes of interrelating and reacting. As an associate research professor in George Washington University's Department of Human Kinetics and Leisure Studies, she will be working closely with the department chairman, Dr. James Breen and faculty.

Her own professionalism and perfectionism leads her to expect the same in others. She plans to choose two graduate students as assistants, and she expects from them not only time, but enthusiasm, creativity and effort as well. The business of establishing herself at the University and planning for a symposium on "Children, Nature, and the Urban Environment" in 1975, are other priorities on her schedule.

Mrs. Dickerson, left, Brian Payne and Betty Pugh survey the future site of the recreation lab for children.

The children won't be the only ones to benefit if this unusual project succeeds. In fact, they themselves may serve as a channel for educating parents and siblings when they go home and tell their experiences. These family exchanges may help the parents shed what Mrs. Dickerson describes as "the preconceived idea that you cannot educate a child at home."

The success that is built up in adapting to a strange environment will naturally spill over into other situations, says Mrs. Dickerson. A child may think twice before saying "I can't" again to something he perceives as fearful or threatening.

Why is the Forest Service involved in research on social problems? Understanding the interrelation of people and trees in densely populated urban areas is a vital part of good forestry. Management, according to today's forester, is not a concept which can or should be limited to wildlands or rural areas alone. Trees in and around cities perform many important functions, tangible and intangible, the value of which can be better realized through proper management. The U. S. Forest Service's Pinchot Institute for Environmental Forestry Research, an interdisciplinary division of the Northeastern Forest Experiment Station, was founded in 1970 to investigate the forest-resource problems of urban man. Research under the Pinchot Institute is shared by university and Forest Service scientists. LaVerne Dickerson's study of urban children and nature is only one of the many new contributions to urban forest research.